

Provisions in Rahall energy bill appear likely to coast

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In the midst of the annual Capitol Hill Oceans Week, a major energy bill with substantial oceans provisions is flying under the radar of lawmakers and oceans groups.

As the House Natural Resources Committee prepares for its second day of marking up Chairman Nick Rahall's (D-W.Va.) comprehensive energy bill, little attention has settled on language that would implement recommendations of several high-profile federal and private oceans advisory commissions.

That the oceans provisions made it into the bill at all is largely due to lobbying by leaders of the Joint Oceans Commission Initiative, Rahall has said. The well-connected group—headed by former Energy Secretary Adm. James Watkins and former congressman and Clinton administration official Leon Panetta—has been pushing lawmakers in both houses to implement recommendations from reports by its predecessors, the Pew Oceans Commission and the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy.

“The wildlife folks have provisions dealing with wildlife in 10 of 12 energy bills introduced. They have made themselves players,” said Natural Resources Democratic aide Jean Flemma on Tuesday at an Oceans Week roundtable. “We did not have the oceans community at our door. It's still a developing community.”

One Natural Resources Committee lawmaker suggested oceans advocates have lost a common focus with the end of their protracted, but ultimately successful, effort last session to reauthorize the Magnuson-Stevens Fisheries Act.

“We put so much energy into Magnuson-Stevens,” said Rep. Wayne Gilchrest (R-Md.), the former chairman of committee's fisheries panel. “It was so up-and-down. It was a huge struggle.”

Now, “everything's in smaller pieces,” he said in an interview. “We don't have so much to worry about, partly because Democrats are in the majority.”

Lawmakers introduced 27 amendments yesterday to Rahall's bill as the full committee began its markup, but only one addressed the broad list of oceans programs.

Rahall's amendment in the nature of a substitute would ax language that would have required the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to report to Congress every five years on climate change's projected effects on ocean and coastal ecosystems and coastal communities. The provision was one of several the Bush administration singled out as “duplicative” of existing programs at a hearing last month.

Other sections of Rahall's bill would call for more research on climate change's effect on oceans and coastal areas, formally establish a national ocean observation system, amend the Coastal Zone Management Act to provide climate-related grants to state and federal agencies, and direct NOAA to begin licensing ocean thermal energy conversion in U.S. waters.

For his part, Gilchrest said he planned to address ocean acidification with an amendment to a bill that would reauthorize the Coral Reef Conservation Act. The Natural Resources Committee is planning to take up the reauthorization this summer.

Gilchrest said his amendment would require new research on the link between ocean acidification and greenhouse gas emissions.